

## Religious Vertigo

I Cor. 2:9-14

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

**I. Introduction:** The title of today's message is "Religious Vertigo." Over the last few years, I've given some thought to writing another Gospel book. And the idea for the book developed from my being struck with just how replete the scriptures are with God's proclamations that things are not as they naturally seem to us, specifically when it comes to God's Gospel, His way of salvation. One of my working titles for the book is the same as today's message title, "Religious Vertigo." So, today will be a very abbreviated overview of sorts of some of the things that I may include in this book should I ever finish it.

As part of my initial research for the book, I began looking for an illustration that I could use in the book's introduction – looking for examples of instances in which things are not as they would seem to be to us. In using an internet search engine, a magazine article popped up about a tragic U.S. fighter jet accident that took place off the coast of Oregon in 2007 – a paraphrase of which I might use in the book's introduction. My paraphrase goes like this: While on a routine training mission, all seemed fine to the experienced pilot flying the F-15A Fighter when everything suddenly came to a tragic ending. Unwittingly, the pilot had flown directly into the Pacific Ocean at a speed of over 600 mph.<sup>1</sup> The accident investigation revealed that there were no adverse weather conditions, there was no distress call made, no attempt to eject, no equipment malfunction nor any indication of pilot distress. Instead, the cause was determined to be "unrecognized spatial disorientation" or what is more commonly known as "aviator (or pilot) vertigo." This pilot's fatal plunge into the ocean took place while just moments before, he was thinking all was just fine. He hit the water completely mistaken about which way was up or down.

Pilots who experience vertigo become mistaken about their plane's altitude, speed, and/ or orientation relative to the horizon. For this reason, military pilots are continually trained and reminded to trust their instruments rather than their own natural instincts. On the ground, our system of senses by which the body maintains its orientation typically proves to be very reliable – much more reliable than when we enter another realm – as inside of a highly maneuverable, fighter jet, soaring through the sky.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Disorient Express" by Tom LeCompte, September 2008 issue of Smithsonian Air & Space Magazine.

In short, vertigo causes the pilot to not know (or to be mistaken about) which way is up or down. Discernment of reality is lost. Things are not as they seem.

With this analogy in mind, my intent is to set forth God's Gospel, His way of salvation, with an emphasis on how it is not at all what we would naturally presume. I hope to show the Bible's teaching that when someone first becomes interested in religion or in their eternal welfare, that their natural way of thinking (as it pertains to eternal salvation) will reflect that they are experiencing what I will refer to as "religious vertigo." You will notice I referred to man's "natural" way of thinking. By the terms "natural" or "by nature" or "naturally," I am referring to that initial, spiritually lost state into which all of us are physically born – physically alive yet, apart from a new birth, we remain spiritually dead and void of the spiritual faculties of life. So, by "natural" thoughts, I will be referring to the predisposed thoughts that accompany and characterize that state of spiritual blindness that initially plagues us all according to God's Word.

Given God's declarations that we will be looking at – the declarations that all are initially mistaken, then we can know that to persist in trusting in a way of salvation that initially (and naturally) seems right to us, like the pilot in our story, will end tragically for us – but now we're talking about an eternal tragedy. Like the fighter pilot, we must not judge by our own natural senses but rather rely on the "instruments" God has given us – His Word, the Bible. And God repeatedly declares to us in His Word that what naturally seems right to us is in fact diametrically opposed to His truth when it comes to the spiritual realm – His way of salvation. The Bible declares that we all begin our physical lives in a spiritually dead or lost state. (Ref. Eph. 2:1).

To be lost is to not know the way to the desired destination – spiritually speaking, the way to heaven. And typically, when someone is lost, at first, they don't realize they are lost; otherwise, they would have corrected course. And we naturally will persist in this fatal approach toward our eternal destination, mistakenly thinking everything is just fine; but, like the pilot experiencing vertigo, not really discerning the reality of our condition – our spiritual condition. We too must look to our instruments, the scriptures, if we are to rightly discern just which way is up (the way up to heaven if you will). And we know by God's Word, that only takes place by the intervening power, grace, and mercy of our sovereign God.

- II. What are we mistaken about?" In discussing this potential book with our Pastor, Bill suggested the following outline as it pertains to identifying that about which we are mistaken (and I may very well use some of this). In short, we discussed how we're naturally mistaken about:
1. The living and true God of the Bible – Who He is and what He is like
  2. Ourselves
  3. What is required for salvation, and we're mistaken about
  4. Christ's Person and His saving work

Time won't allow me to pursue this breakdown in detail this morning but know this: Our misunderstanding of each of these issues is remedied if (and when) God gives us an understanding of His Gospel as set forth in His Word – the simple good news of His way of salvation by God's sovereign grace based solely on the doing and dying of Jesus Christ.

III. A sampling of scriptural assertions: To show that scripture teaches that when it comes to the Gospel – God's way of salvation – the truth does not at all match that which naturally seems right to us, let's begin with that very proclamation found in this verse that is repeated twice in the book of Proverbs:

***“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”***

Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25

This verse is complementary to the answer Christ gave to His disciples in Matthew 13, when asked by His disciples, “Why do you speak in parables.” He responded, ***“Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they*** <speaking of all who remain in that initial, spiritually dead state – without God-blessed eyes and ears - *they...> seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.* <sup>14</sup>***And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias,*** <Here He is quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10 and to support what I'm saying about how frequently God reminds us in His Word that we all are initially spiritually blind and deaf by nature, I found some version of this same prophecy quoted at least a total of 6 other times in the New Testament and similar statements of having eyes that can't see and ears that can't hear is found in at least 7 other Old Testament passages. In the interest of time, we will only look at it as quoted here in Matthew 13. Again, He said “...in them is fulfilled prophecy of Esaias, ...> ***which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:*** <Like the pilot experiencing vertigo – he didn't lose his physical sight; yet, he could not perceive the reality of his position. Verse 15...><sup>15</sup>***For this people's heart is waxed gross*** <hardened>, ***and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed*** <unlike the pilot, they don't want to hear it>; ***lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.*** <sup>16</sup>***But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.”***

Matthew 13:13-16

A physically dead person can't see. They can't hear. Likewise, a spiritually dead person can't hear or see spiritually. Along with the many scriptural declarations of our initial spiritual blindness, we also have the assertions of scripture that most sadly remain in this state of natural deception as Christ said in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 saying, ***“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction*** <that way that seems right to a man>, ***and many there be which go in thereat:*** <And then in contrast, He says...><sup>14</sup>***Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”***

Matthew 7:13-14

In spite of this assertion, for many (including myself) our natural deception, is reinforced by the fact that so many others concur with our false notions. We think, “Why, surely, this many folks can’t all be mistaken!” <Elaborate on own natural thoughts> Yet, if we rely on our instruments, the scriptures, we would be prompted to think again if so many agree with us – for as Christ says – most will approach judgment on the broad way that leadeth to destruction.

So, if we all are (1) initially mistaken and (2) if most remain mistaken, shouldn’t that prompt us all the more to examine things further? Consider the passage I listed for our text, I Corinthians 2:9-14, where we read, “**But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.** <And speaking here to fellow believers, Paul writes...><sup>10</sup>**But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit:** <they must be revealed – apart from God’s revelation of them to us, it isn’t even on our radar> **for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.** <sup>11</sup>**For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.** <That is, by nature – we don’t know the things of God. Verse 12...> <sup>12</sup>**Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.** <sup>13</sup>**Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.** <sup>14</sup>**But the natural man** <i.e. – those who are still in the spiritually dead state into which all begin their physical life> **receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them,** <i.e. – he doesn’t have the ability to know them. He or she can understand what is being said, but they can’t know them in the sense meant here – so as to understand, love and embrace them> **because they are spiritually discerned.**”

1 Corinthians 2:9-14

We see the sinfulness of this condition of all of us by nature clearly laid out by Paul in Romans 3 – a passage which also shows how mistaken we are about ourselves as it pertains to our natural state before God. Here, Paul tells his fellow Jews (when comparing them to the Gentiles):

**“What then? are we** <we, religious Jews> **better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;** <sup>10</sup>**As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:** <Religion does NOT make us righteous. He continues...> <sup>11</sup>**There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.** <sup>12</sup>**They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.**” <In the interest of time, skip on down to verse 15...> <sup>15</sup>**Their feet are swift to shed blood:** <Elaborate and compare to Rom. 10:1-4> <sup>16</sup>**Destruction and misery are in their ways:** <sup>17</sup>**And the way of peace have they not known:** <sup>18</sup>**There is no fear of God before their eyes.** <sup>19</sup>**Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.**

***<sup>20</sup>Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."***

Romans 3:9-12, 15-20

According to God's Word, our natural way of thinking is not just a little different. It is truly upside down to God's way of salvation as set forth in His Gospel. We especially see this when we consider that the Bible teaches that there is a sense in which the moral behavior and virtues (that God instructs us in His Word to strive toward) – deeds we typically applaud and commend when we recognize them among our fellow man – are considered evil in God's sight and not at all commendable to Him. This is because such outwardly, otherwise good behavior, when done by those who remain in their natural state of spiritual ignorance, is done in opposition to the one singular thing that actually will satisfy our Holy God. It's evil because men ascribe to these things some merit before God, which then places those outwardly, otherwise good deeds in rivalry with the singular merit that meets God's holy requirements – the perfection that is only found in Christ's Person and finished work. God will not share His glory. Remember what Christ told the Pharisees...

***"And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."***

Luke 16:15

In other words, that which natural man considers good – God calls evil. This fits with Paul's description of his own initial repentance in Philippians 3 where after citing all the things he had previously held dear and thought had found him in favor with God (e.g. – "touching the law, blameless") he wrote in verse 7 concerning those things, ***"But what things were gain to me, <not the things others called evil, but things he thought gained him something with God...> those I counted loss for Christ. <sup>8</sup>Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, <sup>9</sup>And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:"***

Philippians 3:7-9

That's pretty graphic language which shows how Paul's world had been turned upside down as he indicates that he counts all that which he once highly esteemed, which his fellow religionists highly esteemed, as "dung" in light of the truth of the Gospel, the Gospel that we're told (in Romans 1:16-17) is the power of God unto salvation because therein is the righteousness of God revealed – the very righteousness that the God-man, Jesus Christ, accomplished by His doing and dying as the justified sinners' Substitute – His righteousness in stark contrast to the self-righteousness most of religion (including today's popular version of so-called "christianity") promotes and upon which its adherents naturally base their hope. But as God declares, things are not as they naturally seem to us when it comes to His Gospel – how God saves sinners.

These passages I've shared truly are just a small sampling of the many which warn of our natural deception. <Cite others – wolves, deceiving the elect, another gospel / Jesus.> But I believe this deception is perhaps best summarized for us as it is described in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2 where it is described as the ***“...deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish;...”*** Let's look at that in its context, beginning in verse 8. It reads, ***“And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: <sup>9</sup>Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, <sup>10</sup>And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. <See, unlike the pilot suffering from vertigo, we're not innocent victims in our natural state. No, in our sinfulness, we don't want salvation God's way. So, unlike the pilot – we deserve to perish><sup>11</sup>And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: <sup>12</sup>That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”*** <Elaborate on unrighteousness as self-righteousness – not immorality>

2 Thessalonians 2:8-12

***“...all deceivableness of unrighteousness...”*** would refer to Satan's deception that would have us trusting in anything other than (or in addition to) the one very righteousness of God wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ.

**IV. How can we know if we are mistaken?** Since we're all initially mistaken about the Gospel, an examination should begin with just that, our gospel doctrine - (Ref. 2 Jn 1:9). Ask yourself, what do I really believe to be making the real difference in my being included among the saved? That's your doctrine which identifies your gospel. I can't possibly go into all the false notions that expose the many versions of false gospels so prevalent in our day; however, they all fall under the common umbrella of salvation by works. Now many sincerely believe and will say that they believe salvation is by grace, not works but know this: If you believe salvation is conditioned in any way, to any degree on something done by you, the sinner, then know matter what you call it, you are a full-fledged, practicing member of the false religion of works salvation. And God will not have it!

Like so many others I initially believed as I had been taught. My brothers and I had loving parents who saw to it that we were in church practically every time the doors were open. And there we were taught the popular doctrine that God loves everyone, and that Christ died for everyone. By default, that left me basing my hope on something other than exclusively His obedience unto death – His righteousness. If the merit of His death, His righteousness, did not get the job done for many of those for whom He allegedly died, then something else (something other than His righteousness – the merit of His cross work) had to be making the ultimate difference in my salvation by my way of thinking at that time – not the imputed righteousness of Christ. In fact, for the first 31 years of my life I had never even heard the term, “imputed righteousness.”

And as such, at that time, in my practice of religion I too took pleasure in unrighteousness. And like so many others, I would claim that Christ was my “savior.” But know this, whatever or whomever you think makes the real difference in your being saved is the “savior” you’re trusting in for salvation. Since Christ’s death was presumed to be on behalf of everyone that ever lived, but unfruitful for the many who perish, I was left to imagine the real difference-maker was the decision I made in answering the preacher’s invitation to accept this one we called “Jesus” as my personal savior. To others, it was repeating a prayer or something else that they did or decided. And that was a kind of faith, but mine was faith in faith – not genuine, God-given faith in Christ.

Sadly, this one popular (but deadly) false doctrine of universal atonement alone exposes the fact that those who believe it remain in spiritual blindness – folks who (if they hear this message) now have every reason to seriously examine whether they are among the majority suffering from what I’m calling religious vertigo, who, in their spiritual blindness, continue to imagine that everything is just fine, not discerning the reality that such a false hope will not stand up at the judgment – not according to the standard by which the God of the Bible judges. How does God judge? He graciously tells us in His Word.

In Acts 17:30 – We’re told that God commands all men everywhere to repent (i.e. – to turn from what we naturally would think), and He tells us why He does so in verse 31, ***“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness <whose righteousness?> by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”*** Acts 17:31

If you desire to go to heaven and comply with God’s command to, ***“Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith”*** (2 Cor. 13:5), this verse (Acts 17:31) alone is like an open-book exam for us – telling us exactly the standard of by which we all will be judged. It is as if God says, “I’ll give you the answer straight-up. Here’s how I will judge. I will judge you in righteousness.” This righteousness is none other than that of the one He raised from the dead. That is, it is the perfect righteousness rendered by the Lord of Glory – the perfectly sinless One, Jesus Christ himself. He tells us that we can be assured this is so because His doing and dying got the job done – it demanded life (just as sin demands death) – and so, God raised Him from the dead. (Cite Romans 5:21). And the only way for any of us to gain eternal life and be accepted and raised with Him to heaven’s glory, is if somehow, we can measure up to that same standard – somehow, we must stand before God’s judgment with that same perfect righteousness.

God declared through Paul that there is none righteous, that we’re all sinners so, how can any of us, as far-from-perfect sinners, be accepted into the presence of a holy God who requires perfection? Certainly not by some sin-tainted, far less than perfect decision, prayer, or act that proceeds from us.

But in our “instrument panel,” the Bible, God graciously tells us how in 2 Cor. 5:21 as we’re told that God the Father, made Christ (who knew no sin) to be sin for us (speaking of those He saves); that they might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

What this means is that Christ died to pay the penalty due unto God the Father’s justice – the penalty due unto the sins of God’s elect children that God had given Christ the responsibility for before the world began – imputing their sins to Christ, their Surety – sins Christ absolutely had no part in producing, that they might be credited with the very perfect, sinless obedience and satisfaction to God’s justice that Christ provided by His doing and dying – a perfect righteousness accounted unto them which they had no part in producing.

Think what a wonderful, glorious, most gracious, and merciful exchange! He paid for my sins and credited me with His perfect righteousness! Why spend one moment more approaching judgment pleading or relying upon something done by you (a sinner) when you can plead the only acceptable merit – that which was done for sinners by the Lord of glory – the perfect righteousness of God in Christ?

Some of the scripture I’ve read this morning is clearly directed exclusively toward those He saves and so, they do not apply to everyone. But they do apply to each and every one for whom Christ lived and died. I just stated that “He paid for my sins,” but how can I know that I’m among those for whom He died? God also graciously tells us that in His Word. And there we see it’s because for each one for whom Christ died (and only for each one for whom He died), at some point in their respective lifetime, He will have given them spiritual life because where righteousness has been imputed (as it has been for all for whom He died), it demands life. And with spiritual life, God will have given them that blood-bought gift of faith whereby they can know of their sure hope in Him. And the evidence that this faith is genuine God-given faith is that it will be accompanied by repentance like that of Paul, whereby they repent from that way that had seemed right to them – repenting from ever having dared to imagine that salvation was conditioned in any way upon themselves. This God-given faith will have them believing on Christ and resting on Him alone for all salvation. It will have them believing on Him for the forgiveness of all their sins (a debt paid = a debt forgiven), for righteousness, for eternal life. And it will be their solid hope for entrance into heaven’s glory.

- V. Closing: Well, I hope you can see from the few scriptures we reviewed this morning that God makes it clear that what seems right, isn’t – not when it comes to our initial, natural understanding concerning God’s way of salvation – that condition I’ve referred to as “religious vertigo.” I pray God (if He hasn’t already done so) will deliver you from that condition through His preached Gospel, calling “**...you out of darkness into his marvelous light**” (1 Peter 2:9). If He’s done that for you – what a blessing!



Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.

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